

Message Text

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ACTION EA-10

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FM AMEMBASSY SAIGON

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1438

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 SAIGON 15883

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SUBJECT: SUPPORT FOR PACM IN MR4

1. SUMMARY: MR4 REACTION TO ACTIVITIES OF PEOPLE'S ANTI-CORRUPTION MOVEMENT (PACM) OVER PAST SEVERAL MONTHS HAS BEEN MINIMAL, PARTICULARLY OUTSIDE OF MAJOR CATHOLIC COMMUNITIES AND IN AREAS WHERE CLERGY ARE RELATIVELY CONSERVATIVE. OTHER RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL GROUPS MAINTAINING POLITE BUT DISTANT CONTACT. LARGE-SCALE POPULAR PARTICIPATION UNLIKELY BARRING MAJOR PACM SAIGON SUCCESS OR INCREASED COOPERATION WITH OTHER GROUPS. POSTURE OF PRIESTS AT ALL LEVELS MIXED, WITH SOME ERSTWHILE SUPPORTERS BACKING AWAY FROM PACM IN RECENT MONTHS. END SUMMARY.

2. PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR PACM ACTIVITIES IN MR4 HAS BEEN MINIMAL, PARTICULARLY IN AREAS WHERE CATHOLICS ARE FEW OR WHERE CLERGY IS OLDER AND MORE CONSERVATIVE, SUCH AS AN GIANG AND CHAU DOC. LAY CATHOLICS AND PRIESTS IN BAC LIEU ARE SYMPATHETIC TO PACM BUT HAVE TAKEN A PASSIVE ROLE, AWAITING GUIDANCE FROM PACM
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CENTRAL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE IN SAIGON. CONTRARY TO SOME

PRESS REPORTS, THERE HAVE BEEN NO ORGANIZED DEMONSTRATIONS OUTSIDE CHURCH GROUNDS IN HEAVILY-POPULATED KIEN HOA, GO CONG OR DINH TUONG (INCLUDING MY THO CITY). CATHOLICS IN THESE PROVINCES ARE UNLIKELY TO JOIN THE PACM BANDWAGON IN LARGE NUMBERS UNLESS THERE IS SHARPLY INCREASED POLITICAL ACTIVITY IN SAGION AND/OR GREATER COOPERATION WITH OTHER POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS GROUPS. PUBLIC SYMPATHY FOR PACM AIMS IS SOMEWHAT GREATER IN SA DEC, VINH LONG, AND VINH BINH WHERE THERE HAVE BEEN WELL PUBLICIZED CHARGES OF OFFICIAL CORRUPTION. NONETHELESS, NO SIGNIFICANT PACM ACTIVITIES HAVE BEEN HELD IN THESE PROVINCES, AND THERE ARE NO KNOWN PLANS FOR FUTURE ACTIVITY. THERE APPEARS TO BE WIDESPREAD RELUCTANCE TO BECOME OPENLY ASSOCIATED WITH PACM FOR FEAR OF REPERCUSSIONS FROM LOCAL OFFICIALS DUE TO PACM'S ANTI-GOVERNMENT POSTURE. (COMMENT: OUR INQUIRIES REGARDING PLANS FOR PACM ACTIVITIES HAVE FREQUENTLY BEEN MET WITH THE RESPONSE THAT PLANS HAVE BEEN FORMULATED BUT ARE BEING HELD SECRET; IN MOST CASES, WE BELIEVE THAT, IN FACT, NO LOCAL PLANS EXIST.)

3. EFFORTS HAVE BEEN MADE TO ENLIST THE SUPPORT AND COOPERATION OF OTHER RELIGIOUS GROUPS IN MR4. THE REPRESENTATIVE IN CAN THO OF ONE INFLUENTIAL BUDDHIST GROUP DECLINED AN INVITATION ON THE GROUNDS THAT HE HAD NO INSTRUCTIONS CONCERNING SUCH COOPERATION. HOA HAO AND CAO DAI ELEMENTS IN MR4 LIMIT THEIR ASSOCIATION TO POLITE CONTACT WITH PACM AND GENERAL EXPRESSIONS OF SUPPORT OF ITS ANTI-CORRUPTION THEME. THESE GROUPS ARE TOO FACTIONALIZED IN ANY CASE TO BE ABLE TO WORK OUT ANY EFFECTIVE TIES WITH PACM OR ANY OTHER NATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE. HOA HAO ARE UNLIKELY TO JOIN FORCES WITH ANY OUTSIDE GROUP UNLESS THEIR INTERESTS ARE DIRECTLY INVOLVED.

4. THE ATTITUDE OF PRIESTS IN MR4, INCLUDING NORTHERN CATHOLICS, TOWARDS PACM AND FATHER THANH IS DIVIDED. MAJORITY OF PRIESTS INVOLVED IN PACM ARE YOUNG ACTIVISTS. THEY BELIEVE THAT THE ELIMINATION OF CORRUPTION IS ESSENTIAL TO THE SURVIVAL OF A NON-COMMUNIST SOUTH VIETNAM. THERE ARE, ON THE OTHER HAND, A GROWING NUMBER OF PRIESTS WHO ARE TAKING POSITIONS AGAINST FATHER THANH. THESE INCLUDE A NUMBER WHO ORIGINALLY PARTICIPATED IN THE EARLY ACTIVITIES OF PACM. THE REASONS FOR THEIR DIS-

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ILLUSIONMENT WITH PACM ARE VARIED. SEVERAL FEEL THAT FATHER THANH HAS LOST CONTROL OF THE MOVEMENT; SOME COMPLAIN THAT AN QUANG BUDDHISTS NOW MAKE UP MORE THAN HALF OF THE ORGANIZATION; ONE PRIEST SAID THAT HE LEFT THE MOVEMENT WHEN HE FOUND MANY OF THE SUPPORTERS OF PACM AS CORRUPT AS THE OFFICIALS THEY ATTACKED. THERE IS GENERAL AGREEMENT THAT THE MOVEMENT IS POORLY ORGANIZED, THAT IT IS TRYING TO MOVE TOO FAST AGAINST PRESIDENT THIEU, IS BECOMING TOO POLITICIZED AND HAS BEGUN TO FOLLOW A LINE TOO CLOSE

TO THAT OF THE COMMUNISTS.

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5. THE CATHOLIC HIERARCHY IN MR4 IS ALSO DIVIDED IN ITS ATTITUDE TOWARDS FATHER THANH. THE BISHOPS FOUND INDICTMENT NO. 1 DISTASTEFUL AND BELIEVE THAT FATHER THANH SHOULD HAVE ATTACKED CORRUPTION AT THE LOWEST LEVELS FIRST AND THEN SLOWLY MOVED HIGHER. THEY ARE ALSO RELUCTANT TO CHANGE HORSES IN MID-STREAM BY FORCING PRESIDENT THIEU'S RESIGNATION AND FEAR THAT SUCH POLITICAL ACITIVITY COULD PRODUCE ANOTHER DIEM-STYLE EPISODE. THE BISHOP IN LONG XUYEN HAS DIRECTED THAT THERE BE NO INVOLVEMENT IN PACM BY THE PRIESTS IN HIS DIOCESE. THE OTHER THREE BISHOPS IN MR4 HAVE ISSUED NO SUCH ORDER AND THEIR PRIESTS ARE APPARENTLY FREE TO MAKE THEIR OWN DECISON. THERE ARE, HOWEVER, REPORTS THAT BISHOP NGUYEN NGOC QUANG IN CAN THO AIDED IN THE PREPARATION OF THE DECEMBER 8 ANTI-CORRUPTION MEEING IN BA XUYEN AND THAT HE AGREED TO MOBILIZE THE PRIESTS OF CAN THO FOR THAT MEETING.

6. THE CATHOLIC HIERARCH IN MR4 IS DISCUSSING THE CREATION OF PARISH LEVEL "JUSTICE AND PEACE" GROUPS IN THE STYLE OF FATHER HOANG QUANG'S FRONT AGAINST SOCIAL EVIL, AS AN EFFORT TO DIRECT THE POPULAR FEELING IN DIRECTIONS THAT THEY FEEL MORE PROPER. THIS EFFORT WOULD BEGIN AT PARISH LEVEL AND PROCEED TOWARDS ITS GOAL OF BEING A NATIONAL ORGANIZATION PROMOTING ANTI-CORRUPTION AND, ONE ASSUMES, MORAL UPLIFT.

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7. GVN REACTION TO PACM IN MR4 HAS BEEN RESTRAINED. THE POLICE HAVE MAINTAINED SURVEILLANCE OF ALL PACM ACTIVITIES BUT HAVE MADE FEW DIRECT EFFORTS TO PREVENT THEM AND VERY RARE ATTEMPTS TO DISPERSE THEM. OFFICIALS IN BA XUYEN DID TRY, ALBEIT UNSUCCESSFULLY, TO CONVINCE THE PRIESTS THAT THEY WERE PLAYING INTO THE HANDS OF THE COMMUNISTS BY THEIR PACM ACTIVITIES. IN AN XUYEN, THE PROVINCIAL AUTHORITIES HAVE ORDERED SURVEILLANCE OF PACM ACTIVITIES TO INCLUDE WATCHING GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS IN AN EFFORT TO PREVENT THE SMUGGLING OF EMBARRASSING GOVERNMENT DOCUMENTS TO PACM. SOME EFFORT HAS ALSO BEEN MADE AT ALL LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT TO ELIMINATE AT LEAST THE MOST OBVIOUS CASES OF CORRUPTION. IN CHUONG THIEN, FOR EXAMPLE, THE PROVINCE CHIEF IS REPORTEDLY REMOVING THE DUC LONG DISTRICT CHIEF UNDER THREAT OF CONTINUING DEMONSTRATIONS FROM PACM.

8. COMMENT: AS INDICATED, THE POPULAR REACTION TO PACM IS DIVIDED, WITH MOST LAY CATHOLICS SYMPATHETIC WITH THE GOALS OF THE MOVEMENT BUT TAKING NO ACTIVE ROLE. IF PACM COULD ENLIST THE COOPERATION OF OTHER IMPORTANT POLITICAL OR RELIGIOUS GROUPS, THIS COULD CHANGE. THE PRIESTS AND CATHOLIC HIERARCHY ARE DIVIDED, AND RELUCTANT TO PUBLICLY DECLARE SUPPORT FOR PACM. AS WITH OTHER POLITICAL MOVEMENTS IN THE DELTA, SOUTHERNERS HAVE SHOWN LITTLE INITIATIVE PREFERRING TO FOLLOW LEADS FROM MORE ACTIVIST CENTERS IN SAIGON AND CENTRAL VIETNAM. NONETHELESS, PACM'S CRITICISM OF CORRUPTION IN HIGH PLACES DOES STRIKE A RESPONSIVE CHORD, PARTICULARLY AMONG THOSE ELEMENTS IN THE POPULATION MOST BUFFETED BY RISING PRICES AND DECLINING REAL INCOME. THIS WOULD INCLUDE CIVIL SERVANTS, MILITARY FAMILIES, AND OTHERS ON FIXED INCOME. HOWEVER, TRADITIONAL REGIONAL POLITICAL INERTIA COUPLED WITH THE RELATIVE PROSPERITY EMPLOYED BY THE RICE GROWING PEASANTRY IMPEDES ORGANIZATION OF LARGE-SCALE POLITICAL DEMONSTRATIONS OF ANY KIND. FUTURE ANTI-GVN ACTIVITY IS LIKELY TO FOLLOW SIMILAR DESULTORY PATTERNS REFLECTIVE OF DEVELOPMENTS ELSEWHERE IN THE COUNTRY.

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